DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 246 RC 013 050

AUTHOR Scofield, Sandra
TITLE The Country School Legacy in Western Nebraska. Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier.
INSTITUTION Mountain Plains Library Association, Silt, Colo. Country School Legacy Project.
SPONS AGENCY Chadron State Coll., Nebr.; National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 64p.; For related documents, see RC 013 047-058 and RC 013 070-084. Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; Community Centers; Cultural Education; Curriculum; Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; *One Teacher Schools; Oral History; Rural Education; Rural Environment; *Rural Schools; School Buildings; *School Community Relationship; *Small Schools; State History; Teacher Background; Teacher Education; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Country School Legacy Project; Historic Sites; *Nebraska

ABSTRACT

Part of an 8-state effort to study the role rural schools have played in the history of the frontier and to locate and preserve information related to country schools, this report presents information drawn primarily from interviews with 30 former country school students, board members, and rural school teachers in western Nebraska and from visits to more than 40 schools, both abandoned and operating, covering most of the Nebraska Panhandle. The report addresses six aspects of rural education: country schools as historic sites, country schools and the Americanization of ethnic groups, country schools as community centers, curriculum, teachers (roles, rules, and restrictions), and country schools today. The report concludes that "until recently, the country school has been too close to recent events to be viewed as 'historic' by most people." It is difficult to make sweeping statements about country schools today. They vary in size, enrollment, type of community, and financial resources. Country teachers are better educated than their predecessors and somewhat better paid; however, they still perform duties ranging from janitor work to snake killing. Country schools still serve as community centers, but that function is less important than in the days of poorer transportation. (Author/NEC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211246

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: Humanities on the Frontier

THE COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY IN WESTERN NEBRASKA

Sandra Scofield
Chadron State College
Chadron, Nebraska

1981

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the High Plains Center at Chadron State College

Sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association

AC 013050

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Andrew Gulliford

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Project Director:
Andrew Gulliford
Colorado Mountain College/Silt Elementary School
Silt, Colorado

Media Director:
Randall Teeuwen
Photo America
Fort Collins, Colorado

Exhibits Director:
Berkeley Lobanov
Denver, Colorado

Fiscal Agent:
Joseph Edelen
I. D. Weeks Library
University of South Dakota
Vermillion, South Dakota

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: HUMANITIES ON THE FRONTIER

The Mountain Plains Library Association is pleased to be involved in this project documenting the country school experience. Funding of this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, cost sharing and other contributions enabled us all to work with the several state-based Humanities Committees as well as many other state and local libraries, agencies and interested citizens. We are deeply impressed not only by the enthusiasm for this work by all concerned but by the wealth of experience brought to bear in focusing attention on—and recapturing—this important part of history, and how we got here. This project seems to identify many of the roots and "character formation" of our social, political and economic institutions in the West.

Already the main Project objective seems to be met, stimulating library usage and increasing circulation of historical and humanities materials in this region. Public interest is rising in regional, state and local history. Oral history programs are increasing with greater public participation. The study of genealogy—and the search for this information—is causing much interest in consulting—and preserving—historical materials. What has been started here will not end with this project. The immediate results will tour the entire region and be available for any who wish the program, film, and exhibit. There will be more discussion of—and action on—the issues involving the humanities and public policies, past and present. The Mountain Plains Library Association is proud to be a partner in this work, the Country School Legacy, and its contribution to understanding humanities on the frontier.

Joseph J. Anderson
Nevada State Librarian
Past President
Mountain Plains Library Association

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. TITLE PAGE i

II. TABLE OF CONTENTS ii

III. INTRODUCTION iii

IV. COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS HISTORIC SITES 1

V. COUNTRY SCHOOLS AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF ETHNIC GROUPS 15

VI. COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTERS 24

VII. THE CURRICULUM OF THE COUNTRY SCHOOL 29

VIII. THE COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER: ROLES, RULES, AND RESTRICTIONS. . . 38

IX. COUNTRY SCHOOLS TODAY. 48

X. BIBLIOGRAPHY 58

INTRODUCTION

This project was part of an eight-state effort to study the role rural schools have played in the history of the frontier and to locate and preserve information related to country schools.

The information included in this report was drawn primarily from interviews with 30 former country school students, board members, and rural school teachers in western Nebraska. Also, over 40 rural schools were visited. Schools visited covered most of the Nebraska Panhandle and included both abandoned schools and operating schools.

Special thanks are given to Mrs. Betty Loosbrock and to the students enrolled in the Interviewing and Communications Techniques class at Chadron State College during the 1980-81 fall semester for their help in conducting interviews and locating schools for this project.

Thanks are also given to the many people throughout western Nebraska who allowed themselves to be interviewed, who loaned material to the project, and who offered help in other ways.

Sandra Scofield

COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS HISTORIC SITES

Not too many years ago it was almost impossible to drive across the back roads of Nebraska and not encounter a country school building. Nebraska had over 7,000 school districts and over 7,000 school buildings from 1909 through 1942.[1] When the state legislature passed the School District Reorganization Act in 1949, the number of districts had decreased only slightly to a total of 6,734. Reorganization steadily reduced these numbers; but in 1962, there were still 3,077 school districts spread across the state's 93 counties--more school districts than the total in the western states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Hawaii combined.[2] Thus, the country school has been as much a part of the Nebraska landscape as windmills and cattle.

Even in western Nebraska, which is much less densely populated than the rest of the state, throughout the 1940's and '50's one might have found a country school as often as every three to five miles in some counties.

Although Nebraska still had 431 one-room schools in 1979, the country schools that remain are a tiny fraction of what once was.

Today, one can drive for miles in western Nebraska and not encounter an operating country school. For example, in the 2,063 square miles of Sioux County there are now only 15 school districts and 13 schools. At one time, there were 85 school districts.

Dawes County formed a total of 119 school districts across its 1,389 square miles. In 1900, there were 76 schools in the county. Today, only 17

---

[1]"Public School Statistics," Nebraska Blue Book, 1978-79.

[2]"Discussion Guide for State and Regional Meetings," Governor's 1963-64 Conference on Education.

[3]"The One Room Schools," Newsweek, February 5, 1979, p. 80.

districts remain; 15 of these are rural and 14 maintain their own elementary school.

Three counties in the Panhandle (Banner, Deuel, and Kimball) no longer maintain any "Class I school districts,"[4] which is the term generally used to refer to rural schools.

The buildings that house the remaining Class I schools in western Nebraska range from the classic one-room frame "box" that has changed very little in the 40 or more years since it was built to larger brick, frame, or prefabricated structures of several rooms complete with audio-visual aids, gymnasiums, dining rooms, and other features expected of any modern school. Some of these larger schools have been built as recently as the 1960's. Others, at first glance, give the impression of being younger than their 50 years, such as the Banner School in Sheridan County or the 75 year old Lake Alice School near Scottsbluff. Their relatively modern appearances are due to careful maintenance and occasional remodeling over the years to meet the needs of the district or the requirements of the state.

What happened to all of those hundreds of other country school buildings that once covered Nebraska?

Many of these buildings were either torn down or sold when the school was closed or the district reorganized. Often the land the school sat upon did not belong to the district and when the school was no longer in use the district was required to move the school.

A lease between a landowner and School District 48 in Dawes County dated November 20, 1925, was probably typical of the agreements made by districts to use land owned by private individuals. The lease allowed the school district "one acre of ground . . . to be used for school purposes only

---

[4]A Class I school in Nebraska maintains only elementary (k-8) grades under the direction of a single school board.

for 50 years and thereafter as long as this is used for school purposes" for the sum of one dollar. The school district reserved the right to remove from the land any improvements placed on the land. The lease stated further that failure of the school district to use the land for school purposes during five consecutive years would terminate the lease.

Since many schools were closed in the 1950's and '60's, auctions of school buildings were common. A neighboring farmer or rancher might bid on the building and then tear it down for the lumber or more commonly move it and convert it to a house or shed. The distinctive rectangular shape and peaked roof of a former country school building can be identified on many farms and ranches today.

A few school buildings remain on the site where school was last held, owned and preserved by the district in anticipation of possible future needs or out of a sense of respect and perhaps some nostalgia for the past.

One such district, Mt. Pleasant or District 17 in Sheridan County, was identified by Mrs. Robert Gealy of Gordon in a letter to the Country School Legacy Project. Mrs. Gealy wrote:

> "District 17 ceased to exist about eight years ago when it merged with two other districts to form an enlarged District 83. School continued in the Mt. Pleasant Schoolhouse, however, until last year, when a new, more centralized facility was built. Thus, right now the old schoolhouse is unused except as a community center. We hope very much to maintain it in good condition, feeling that we may again need the space in case of enlarged district enrollment, and also believing that a schoolhouse which served faithfully for so many years deserves a great deal of respect."

The attitudes expressed by this letter are common among districts that continue to preserve schoolhouses. The trend toward larger farms and ranches and fewer rural families makes it unlikely that most of these schools will ever be called back into service, but people who grew up in the district often say, "I hate to see the old school go." This strong sense of attachment

to a building may seem hard to understand until one realizes that, in many cases, three or four generations of a family may have attended school in this building.

A few school buildings have been preserved by private individuals. One of these, the Evergreen School, is located southwest of Chadron, Nebraska, on the Deadhorse Road and has been maintained by Mr. and Mrs. Jack Lindeken.

Evergreen School was established in January of 1886, and a log schoolhouse was built from the pine trees that grew in the area. An interesting feature of the Evergreen School is the fact that this original log structure still stands on the original site. The log building was covered with frame in 1912, and a bell tower was added, but the building has not been modified significantly since that time. School has not been held in the Evergreen District (District 22) for over 35 years, but the Lindekens have preserved the building and it looks very much today as it did when school was being held.

When the Evergreen School closed, children in the district were sent to school in the district to the north, District 18. District 18, or Flag Butte, closed during the 1970's but the school building was preserved by members of the Deadhorse Community. This schoolhouse, built in 1887, is located just three miles north of the Evergreen School. Originally, the building was located one-half mile north and one mile west of its present site, but in 1911 it was moved to its present location at the foot of Flag Butte for which the district and the school are named.

Flag Butte is a prominent land formation in the Deadhorse Community in Dawes County. According to a history of the community, the butte was named by early settlers one Sunday as they attended Sunday school at the home of Ben Davis, who lived just west of the butte. The attendants at Sunday school decided to designate one of the surrounding buttes as a place where a flag

could be raised on "suitable occasions." What is now known as Flag Butte was chosen by a vote, and for many years thereafter the young men of the neighborhood raised a flag on July 4th and presumably other patriotic holidays.[5]

The flag raising activity lapsed for an undetermined number of years, but the local 4-H club revived the old tradition on July 4, 1957, and have continued to raise a flag and present a pageant on top of the butte every year on July 4th at sunrise. Approximately 100 people living in or near the community attend this event and are treated to breakfast afterward served in the schoolhouse by the women of the community's extension club.

Although other community events were held in the Flag Butte school building and many members of the Deadhorse Community[6] attended school there, probably this flag raising event was primarily responsible for the feeling by the community that they would like to see the building preserved.

When the Flag Butte School closed in the mid-1970's and District 18 was divided and became part of two other districts, members of the Deadhorse Community decided to save the old school building. The building was to be auctioned, so a fund raising drive began immediately in the neighborhood to raise money to bid on the school. The building site was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Hawthorne who agreed to let the community keep the school on that site if money could be raised to purchase the building.

The fund raising drive raised over five hundred dollars, and when the day of the auction arrived, community members waited anxiously to see if

---

[5]Minnie Alice Rhoads, A Stream Called Deadhorse (Chadron, Nebraska: The Chadron Printing Co., 1957), p. 35.

[6]One might think the entire community would have been named Flag Butte, however it is named for Deadhorse Creek, a stream that was named by an Indian legend, and that runs the entire length of the community.

they would have enough to buy the school. The bidding opened at $100.00 with the community members who wanted to preserve the school making the first bid. Apparently word had spread about the project for no other bids were made and the community had its schoolhouse. With the remaining money, the community was able to purchase some of the building's contents and other interested people purchased items and donated them to the project. Eventually a non-profit corporation was formed, and the building is owned and preserved today by the Flag Butte Community Center Corporation. Although it is only partially furnished, the building contains a few items that were used in the school and is available for use by community organizations. It is also, of course, still the site of the annual 4th of July flag raising. Recently another event, the Farmer's Market, has been organized and is held annually in the fall to raise money to maintain the old schoolhouse.

Although it is becoming more unusual to find nonfunctioning school buildings still standing on their original sites, a few still remain. One which is in an especially picturesque setting is located 11 miles south and one mile west of Rushville, Nebraska. As one drives west from Highway 250, over the Sandhills area that Mari Sandoz wrote about, the road curves and drops into a valley through which Pine Creek runs. The Mill School, also known as the Colclessor School, sits west of the creek.

This white frame school building has not been used for approximately 20 years although the district (District 88) still holds school in another country schoolhouse a few miles north. The building is in good condition and is still partially furnished with desks and benches that were typical of an old country school.

The Mill School of today shows almost no sign of the activity that once surrounded it. Just east of the school on Pine Creek, sat a grist mill owned by Henry Colclessor. Mr. Colclessor also built a two-story stone block house and a store near the school. At one time there was a dance hall and a post office.

According to local accounts, Henry Colclessor was a staunch supporter of the school although he was a bachelor. He always made his home available to families during the winter months while their children attended school. Because of the small community that grew up around the school, largely out of Mr. Colclessor's efforts, the school was considered a good teaching position. Teachers were always anxious to secure a job there because of the social life. Today, the only evidence of the small community is the school, a mill pond, and a diversion ditch.

Sioux County is a source of many interesting country schools. The county has an active historical society which has collected histories of many of the country schools in the county and has moved an old schoolhouse into Harrison and restored it. The school sits along the main street of the small town beside a small post office that has also been restored.

The school building, which is distinguished by a raised stage at one end, was purchased by the historical society for $200 (donated by Dr. Grayson Meade and Mr. Pete Nunn). The building was changed structurally when one of two doors was sealed, however the interior restoration is quite complete and representative of an early twentieth century school in Sioux County. Most of the items have been donated including slate blackboards, an antique round stove, desks, a teacher's desk, book cases and books from the county superintendent's office, and a water jug of crockery. A small jacket hangs in the cloak room.

Interesting stories surround several schools in Sioux County. The Curly School, District 12, is now located along Highway 71 between Scottsbluff and Crawford, approximately 40 miles from Scottsbluff and 17 miles from Hemingford. Originally the school was part of a small community named Curly which was 30 miles north of Scottsbluff within three and one-half miles of the present Watson Ranch. People who have driven Highway 71 will remember this ranch for the large windmills that sit on a hill overlooking the ranch headquarters.

The community of Curly was founded by Cyrus Henry Henderson who started a post office and a store on the site and who also organized the school district in 1908. Mr. Henderson had requested that the post office be named "Henderson" or "Henry", but both names had already been assigned. His son, Dale Henderson of Scottsbluff, related that Mr. Henderson was then faced with the frustrating task of finding another name; and as he ran his fingers through his curly hair, he said, "we'll just call it Curly."

Although the community of Curly has not been in existence for approximately 60 years and the school building was moved, it is still referred to as the Curly School. The original school was of sod and when it was abandoned the frame building which is used today was built about 1912.

In many cases across western Nebraska, the country school is all that remains of a small town or post office. Bodarc School, also in Sioux County, now serves the combined areas of District 9 and District 6 and is referred to as District 6. The stucco-covered frame school building, located 13 miles northeast of Harrison, Nebraska, is the original location of the Bodarc School and is still used for classes. Four students were enrolled in the fall of 1980.

Bodarc was once a growing community in Sioux County and was considered a possible location for the county seat. However, the decision to route the C&NW railroad through Harrison eventually led to Bodarc's decline.

The circumstances surrounding the name of the community are interesting. "Bodarc" is a corruption of a French term for a shrub native to Texas. One of the early founders of the community proposed "Oressa" which was his daughter's name for the post office. At the same time, a post office in Texas requested "Bodarc." A mix-up in Washington resulted in the names requested by the two communities being switched. From one local account, several years passed before the residents of Bodarc learned the origin of the community's name. Today, a church, cemetery, and school are all that remain of Bodarc.

The oldest frame schoolhouse in Box Butte County is also all that remains of a small town. The town of Nonpariel, originally named Buchanan, for Buchanan, Michigan, was located one mile west and five miles south of Hemingford. About 1890 the town had two general stores, a blacksmith shop, one bank, a newspaper, a harness shop, a feed store, and a lumber yard combined with an agricultural implement depot. According to a history of the county, the local newspaper editor changed the town's name to Nonpariel because it appealed to him.[7] The name refers to a small size of type and it also means without equal.

The town was abandoned about 1890 when the county seat was moved to Hemingford. As with Bodarc, in Sioux County, the course of the railroad led to the demise of Nonpariel. Today, nothing remains to remind us of the town except the abandoned school building.

The buildings mentioned so far are all one-room frame buildings except for the Banner School and the Lake Alice School, but many country schools were larger buildings and some even housed high schools. In Dawes County, for example, the towns of Belmont, Marsland, and Whitney all have populations

---

[7] Early Days of Alliance and Box Butte County, collected by the Point of Rock Chapter, DAR, Alliance, Nebraska.

of fewer than 100 today and maintain only an elementary school. All three schools served students through high school at one time.

In more heavily populated areas of western Nebraska, country schools of several rooms were necessary just to house grades kindergarten through eight. One of these schools, the Fairview School, is located two miles north and two and one-half miles west of Mitchell. Fairview, or District 34, was built in 1920 and is still in use today. The two-room frame building is painted white with bright orange double doors which are covered by arches.

The present teacher of Fairview, Mrs. Lynn Scott, has been collecting information about the school for several years and she and her students held an open house in May of 1980 to celebrate the school's 60th year in the present building.[8]

Many graduates of Fairview attended the reunion and swapped stories of their early school days. One of the stories told explained the "mystery" of initials that appear on the walls of what is now the teachers' workroom. It seems that this room used to house a coal furnace and the older boys used to be responsible for stoking the fire. One of their favorite pastimes was to burn their initials into the wall whenever they had furnace duty.

Another school building in Scottsbluff County even older than Fairview is the Lake Alice School. Built in 1915, the school has six classrooms, an office and a library. A cafeteria and gymnasium were built next to the building in 1951 and today approximately 80 elementary students attend school there. The school also maintains a teacherage. At one time, high school training was offered at Lake Alice.

In the southern Panhandle, the Keith County Historical Society has preserved the old school district #7 building and it is on display in Ogallala.

---

[8]Two buildings, one of which was a dugout, were used before this building was built. School has been held continuously in the district since 1906.

Banner County has also restored an old school. This building is a small log structure built in 1886 that sits next to the museum of the Banner County Historical Society.

A few country schools were built of stone. One of these, built in 1903, has been restored and is a part of the Ash Hollow State Historical Park near Lewellen, Nebraska. Ash Hollow was a major milestone and favorite camping site of immigrants traveling by covered wagon west on the Oregon Trail.

Two other schools in the southern end of the Nebraska Panhandle have been partially researched and are of historical interest. District 14, the Rush Creek School in Cheyenne County, was built in 1921 and has been in operation since. The present building replaced the original school which began operating in 1898. The original school was known as the German School until 1918 when it changed its name to Happy Hollow. Some of the children now attending the Rush Creek School are grandchildren of the original German pupils.

Finally, the Mud Springs School, built in 1901 and located in Morrill County south and east of Bridgeport, is currently working through the offices of Congresswoman Virginia Smith to be designated as a national historic site. The school district has been dissolved, but the building is still used by the community. The Nebraska State Historical Society has also offered seasonal exhibits in the school.

Mud Springs is of particular historical interest in Nebraska as the site of a stage, Pony Express, and telegraph station. It was also a military outpost and was the site of a battle between soldiers and Cheyenne Indians.

With the exceptions of Ash Hollow and Mud Springs and the schools that have been restored by local historical societies, the reader may question

which schools are truly historic sites. There seems to be no clear answer to such a question, but one definition of a historic site is "a site which represents aspects of a community's or a nation's heritage and is a source of community pride." By that definition, nearly all old country school buildings qualify as historic sites. This paper has attempted to identify a few of those sites in western Nebraska that are representative and which are either surrounded by an interesting story or which have been preserved in some way.

Unfortunately, although a good number of buildings are still in use or have been preserved, the history surrounding the building has only been partially recorded and much of that has been lost. As one teacher, curious about her school's history commented: "Buildings tell no tales." There is much to be researched before many of the interesting questions about country schools and their histories can be answered.

It is interesting to speculate about reasons for the scarce amount of documentation pertaining to many country schools. The most obvious explanation stems from the fact that few state requirements were imposed and careful or complete records were not always kept by rural schools. Early teachers had plenty to do without keeping vast amounts of records up to date; and even if they had been inclined to do so, apparently they were not always trained to keep records. Entries recorded in various early school registers indicate a wide variety of types of data recorded. When a school closed, many of those registers were either lost or destroyed. Those that were kept were usually preserved by an individual. Thus, primary documentation is often nonexistent or difficult to locate.

Data recorded in the county superintendent's office is usually only a small portion of what was recorded in the register. Early registers, when they can be found, contain not only names of teachers and students, grades

and progress reports, but also comments about the curriculum, textbooks used, and occasionally lists of library books owned by the school.

School board minutes are a source of information about the financing of the school district and other aspects of the school's management; however, like the registers, they have not always been preserved.

Perhaps another clue to the reason for so little documentation about schools is to be found in the closing comment of a manuscript collected by the DAR chapter in Alliance, Nebraska. In Early Days of Alliance and Box Butte County, an unidentified writer remarks: "This paper touches briefly on the beginning of things in our county and city, and we have said but little concerning the two things that mean most of all else to our people, our churches and schools. They speak for themselves. They need no 'write up' from individuals."

From such a comment, one might conclude that schools played such a central role in the community and were so common that they were almost taken for granted. School was school. Everybody had one; they were generally viewed as important; but no one analyzed or quantified or wrote much about them. Indeed to do so would have probably been considered a waste of time by pioneer communities who were struggling to settle a new region. With the demands of earning a living and building new farms and ranches and towns, few people had time to consider any of their actions or institutions in an academic fashion.

Louis Wirth observed: "The most important thing . . . we can know about a man is what he takes for granted, and the most elemental and important facts about a society are those that are seldom debated and generally regarded as settled."[9] If this is true, it would seem that the history surrounding

---

[9]Louis Wirth, "Preface," Ideology and Utopia, An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge, by Karl Mannheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1963), p. xxiv.

country schools will be increasingly worthy of study in order to learn more about frontier society and rural life.

Until recently, the country school has been too close to recent events to be viewed as "historic" by most people. In fact, where country schools still survive, this attitude could be expected to persist to some extent. Most of us tend to save the term "historic" for places or people that are removed from our experience by 100 years or more, which have an air of glamour or romance about them, or which appeal to our nostalgic yearnings. Yet, even by this definition, the country school is gradually being recognized as important historically. Some historical societies have already done much to preserve relevant country school history as have other groups and individuals. It appears likely this trend will continue.

In addition to the schools mentioned in this paper, there are many others which have interesting histories. There seems to be a deep sense of history and a sense of place among people interviewed for the Country School Legacy Project. People want to know something of their past and want their children to share it.

Just recently, a sod schoolhouse and stone schoolhouse, both located in Sioux County, were identified for this project.[10] The owners of both buildings indicate an interest in preserving the buildings. In addition, as the news of the project has spread, many people have come forward offering to be interviewed or loan materials. Such interest and effort assure that a vital part of the western frontier experience and the succeeding development of the western states will not be lost.

---

[10]The sod school is located on the Clarence Wilkie ranch south of Harrison. The sod has been covered with cement. The stone school was reported by Roger Gillette of Crawford whose father helped build the structure about 1911. The building is south of Glen on the Clarence Kreman ranch.

COUNTRY SCHOOLS AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF ETHNIC GROUPS

Schools today across the United States strive to be sensitive to the needs and problems faced by the children of immigrant groups and also attempt to help students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds retain and appreciate their cultural heritage be it Native American, Asian, Hispanic, African, or European.

Bilingual teachers are sought after by school systems to assist students, not only in learning English, but to facilitate instruction in other subjects while encouraging children to retain their native language.

This sensitivity to and appreciation for preserving the native language and customs of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds is a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. schools brought about largely by the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Various ethnic minorities followed the example set by black Americans and placed new importance on the study and preservation of their cultures. In response to these groups' demands, as well as a recent upward trend in immigration patterns, federal and state dollars have been allocated toward bilingual education and multi-cultural education.

While there have always been ethnic communities and neighborhoods in the United States, today as never before Americans emphasize those aspects of their culture that are special and unique from those of the larger society or of other ethnic groups. People take pride in their heritage and the search for roots by Americans of all nationalities has become almost a national obsession.

This trend toward cultural pluralism reflects a much different philosophy than that which has prevailed throughout most of this nation's history. The United States has labeled itself a "melting pot" since its founding, and an important task assigned to education was the transformation of literally millions of immigrants from all over the world into "Americans" who were

prepared to become citizens, speak the language, and generally succeed in their new home.

At first glance, one might say the responsibility of the schools is no different today than it was in the past. One might argue the demands placed upon schools to prepare immigrants from Southeast Asia and Cuba, for example, are essentially the same as they were in any era when we welcomed an influx of new immigrants to our shores. However, today's schools are in a different and more difficult situation than they were in the past.

Immigrants who enrolled their children in American schools during the 1800's and much of the 1900's demanded nothing more for themselves and their children than to become "Americanized" as quickly as possible, to be assimilated into the larger society, and to leave the "old country" ways behind.

Thirty years ago, Henry Steele Commanger recognized the dilemma modern schools face today when he concluded: "The 19th century school, for example, had an enormous job in Americanization--but it was a clearly defined job, universally willed by the people. Today's school faces a nice problem in deciding whether its education should reinforce nationalism--or inspire internationalism."[1]

The schools, throughout much of America's history, proceeded to educate students without much, if any, thought given to preserving the student's native language or culture in the process. If the ethnic traditions or native language were to be taught at all, it was the responsibility of the parents to do so. Apparently it was unusual for the parents to do this because they wanted their children to "be Americans."

---

[1]Henry Steele Commanger, "Our Schools Have Kept Us Free," Life, October 16, 1950.

The scope of this task, even with the support of parents and students, must have been almost overwhelming. One can imagine the frustration of both the teacher and the student as they tried to communicate when the student had little or no command of English. Obviously the language had to be mastered before they could move on to very many other subjects.

One man interviewed, Jack Lindeken of Chadron, recalled going to school speaking only German, but luckily his teacher also spoke some German so he felt the transition was fairly easy.[2] Probably not many non-English speaking children were so fortunate.

Mrs. Lena Delsing of Hemingford went to school near her father's homestead northeast of Hemingford. In this area, almost all of the settlers spoke German. Mrs. Delsing tells of a school where everyone spoke German--except the teacher: "We all talked German and then when we went to school we had to learn to talk English. We all had a heck of a time getting started . . . It wasn't as bad for me as it was for the older ones because when they went to school then they wanted to teach us English."[3] Mrs. Delsing went on to say that, although her father could speak English, her mother didn't learn until the children went to school.

It was even more difficult for children if they were the only ones in the school who didn't speak English. Mrs. Mae Manion of Alliance taught Mari Sandoz in a country school in Sheridan County. Mrs. Manion remembers that children from the Sandoz family were picked on by other students because they hadn't gone to school and "spoke with a little accent." Mrs. Manion observed that most of the settlers of that time

---

[2]Interview with Jack and Alyce Lindeken, December 17, 1980, Dawes County, Nebraska.

[3]Interview with Mrs. Lena Delsing, November 8, 1980, Hemingford, Nebraska.

did speak with some accent, but she occasionally found it necessary to protect Mari from the teasing of other children.[4]

Another man, of German descent, who started school in the 1890's, Mr. John Oldenburg of Gordon, told of being a member of the only German family in his school district. When he started school, he couldn't speak English and recalled having a difficult time the first year. Although he was an excellent student in other subjects, his trouble with the English language led to the other children labeling him a "dumb Dutchman."[5] Although he seemed to take this in good humor, one can only guess at how difficult it must have been at times to endure the teasing while struggling with the complexities of a new language--particularly if the student happened to be the eldest child with no help coming from brothers or sisters.

Generally, the schools were not especially prepared to help children learn to speak English. Former students interviewed in western Nebraska felt that learning a new language was primarily the responsibility of the individual student. When asked how they did this, they almost always replied, "I learned from the other students."

Some schools did, however, make special attempts to help students learn English. Mrs. Mae Manion remembered a cousin who told of one school that offered a special session during the short term in the summer for children who came from a home where a foreign language was spoken.[6]

Occasionally, students would be lucky enough to have a teacher who had some experience with one or more foreign languages and who was espe-

---

[4]Interview with Mae Manion, December 5, 1980, Alliance, Nebraska.

[5]Interview with John Oldenburg, November 11, 1980, Gordon, Nebraska.

[6]Interview with Mae Manion.

cially sensitive to the needs of students who were trying to learn English. One of these teachers was Mari Sandoz.

In Old Jules, Mari Sandoz wrote about her father's active role in encouraging people to settle in the Sandhills of Nebraska. Old Jules was a "locator" which meant he helped new settlers find and claim land. The experience of meeting and living around many of these recent immigrants helped prepare Mari to teach their children.

During part of her teaching career, when Mari Sandoz was teaching in the school near where her family lived, four new students enrolled in the school. Mrs. Caroline Pifer, Mari's sister, described a technique Mari used to help these children learn English:

> When I was in the second grade, we had these four youngsters come from Vienna . . . My sister was teaching again; she taught every other year in our school. She ordered translation books from Bohemian into English and of course we memorized those books along with these students. As they were getting English, we were getting Bohemian. I don't remember any of it any more, but anyway we had a smattering of Bohemian from those books.[7]

Mrs. Pifer went on to describe how quickly the children progressed with this teaching method: "One youngster was thirteen, one was fourteen (those were the oldest ones), and the one would have been in the ninth grade in Vienna. So Mari started him out in a first grade reader and he made all eight grades that winter, and his sister that was thirteen made it to the seventh grade."

As she went on, Mrs. Pifer described how Mari had learned to work with foreign students:

> My dad was locating foreigners all the time and they were staying in our house. They usually stayed at least two weeks and some of them stayed all winter if they got snowed in . . . She (Mari) knew

---

[7]Interview with Caroline Sandoz Pifer of Gordon, Nebraska, December 11, 1980, Chadron, Nebraska.

> a smattering of a half a dozen languages because of these people that had been with us. And then too, . . . my sister could only speak German when she went to school so she had to learn English when she went to grade school. So she had a lot of sympathy for these kids because she knew what it was to face this thing with foreign language.[8]

Of course there was more to the process of Americanization than learning the language. Martin Mayer mentioned one important ingredient:

> Whatever the aims of education, the aims of schools are constant. They can be described, in a pet phrase, as "citizenship education" . . . Some commentators seem to believe that this concept . . . is a novel American contribution. In fact, this is what the schools are about everywhere: American schools make American, British schools make British, Russian schools make Russian citizens. What else can they do?[9]

As they went about the task of making American citizens, early schools did not have any direction from the state, such as a course of study, that suggested what or how to teach. These schools are usually described as offering only the "basics" of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but from one description, citizenship education was at the center of many learning activities:

> The curriculum, though limited, contained the essential subjects. Reading, Penmanship, History, Music, and English stressed moral and patriotic values. Copybook lines were "Practice makes perfect," "Onward and upward," "A stitch in time saves nine." Songs most often sung were "America," "Tenting on the Old Campground," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "Marching Through Georgia."[10]

Most schools began their day with the "Pledge of Allegiance" and it wasn't unusual to include readings from the Bible.

---

[8] Ibid.

[9] Martin Mayer, The Schools (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1961), p. 32.

[10] Mae Manion, Prairie Pioneers of Box Butte County (Alliance, Nebraska: Iron Man Industries, 1976), p. 29.

Later on, a Course of Study articulated the aims of various subject matter areas and prescribed the content to be taught. According to the Course of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska printed in 1932, fifth and sixth graders were to study both "Home Training for Citizenship" and "School Training for Citizenship."

"Home Training" included such things as: rules and responsibilities in the home, maintenance of the home by learning to save and use a budget, use of leisure time and health.

The "goals of good citizenship in school" were stated to be: "loyalty, education, good health, service, thought for others, teamwork, thrift, reliability, self-control, and obedience."

In addition to citizenship training in the fifth and sixth grades, which was a part of the History and Civics curriculum, students studied the local community and learned about the organization and financing of their school and also about city and village government.

Teachers were encouraged to discuss such state and national holidays as: Labor Day, Columbus Day, Election Day, Armistice Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Washington's Birthday, Lincoln's Birthday, Easter, Arbor Day, and Independence Day.

Students also studied mythological heroes, Biblical heroes, national heroes such as Washington and Lincoln, and such writers and poets as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Whittier, Longfellow, and Stevenson.

History and Civics for the seventh and eighth grade included intensive study of state and national government as well as American history.

"Character and citizenship training" for the first through fourth grades was taught as a part of their English lessons. Such American values as cleanliness, courtesy, cooperation, respect for law, self-respect, reverence, honor, courage, and fair play were emphasized.

Character education was stressed and teachers were told, if they read their Course of Study carefully, that it was more important than the academics. Dr. Ernest Horn of the State University of Iowa was quoted:

> I have two boys. It does not worry me very much when I find they missed one or two additional problems in their last test, or misspelled a few words, but if they come home with the slightest indication of any moral deficiency, I must confess that I am worried. The biggest thing in school work falls in the field of moral and civic education.[11]

Thus with such educational philosophies and curriculums, the country schools created national unity out of the tremendous diversity of ethnic groups that came to western Nebraska to settle. They prepared the children of Germans, Dutch, Irish, Poles, Swiss, Czechs, Swedes, Japanese, and Mexicans (just to name a few) to live and work together.

Perhaps one of the factors that made this possible, in addition to the strong desire of immigrants to adopt the ways of their new country, was the very fact that the curriculum was relatively narrow and books and other resources were limited. Everyone studied the same values, the same books and authors, and thus developed a common frame of reference and heritage. As Henry Steele Commanger described the success of the schools in transmitting culture:

> Yet we created unity out of diversity, nationalism out of particularism. Powerful material forces--the westward movement, canals and railroads, and a liberal land policy--sped this achievement. But just as important were intellectual and emotional factors--what Lincoln called "those mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone." These were the contibution of poets and novelists, editors and naturalists, historians and jurists, orators and painters--and the medium through which they worked was the school. Through the whole 19th century, novelists like Cooper and Sims and Hawthorne, poets like Bryant and Longfellow

---

[11] Course of Study for the Elementary Schools in Nebraska, (Omaha, Nebraska: K-B Printing Company, 1932), p. 37.

and Whittier, painters like Trumbull and Stuart and Peale, historians like Jared Sparks and George Bancroft, schoolmen like Noah Webster with his spellers and the McGuffeys with their readers--all these and scores of others created and popularized that common group of heroes and villains, that common store of poems and stories, of images and values of which national spirit is born.[12]

---

[12] Ibid.

COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTERS

Some country schools were the site of all sorts of activities other than those normally associated with education. In western Nebraska, the school district usually contained no town and often was miles from any population center. Thus, the only public building in many rural communities was the schoolhouse, and the boundaries of the school district frequently defined the boundaries of a rural community. Meetings, social gatherings, and even religious services were held either in homes or at the schoolhouse.

Today, country schools are still used as polling places and for an occasional meeting on a local issue, but the social and religious activities are largely a thing of the past. The coming of the automobile and better roads enabled country residents to go to nearby towns for church services and entertainment, so it is relatively uncommon for the school to host any activity that isn't somehow related directly to the school's function. Rural schools still present annual Christmas programs and sponsor social events to raise money for the school, but they are seldom used to the extent they once were by the community.

Before the age of the automobile and large consolidated school districts, the country school served a variety of functions. A major one was entertainment. Neighborhood dances, card parties, pie suppers, and box socials were held at the school and, as one woman put it, "were the only entertainment country people had."

Mrs. Caroline Pifer, daughter of Old Jules Sandoz, told of a large barn her father built, part of which was used for a community hall, schoolhouse, and even for movies. She related her father's belief that people living in the isolated stretches of the Sandhills needed oppor-

tunities to get together, so, although he didn't dance himself, nor did he believe in dancing, he allowed dances to be held at their school because he felt people "had to have a chance to get acquainted."[1]

Not all schools permitted dances. One man interviewed recalled a change in philosophy came about in his district with the election of a majority of schoolboard members who opposed dancing. After that time dances were no longer held in the school in his district. On the other hand, in parts of Sioux County, it was customary to hold a dance to welcome a new teacher to the community. So the values of the schoolboard apparently determined to a great extent what activities went on in the school.

Other events that went on at the school primarily for the entertainment of the neighborhood included spell downs and cipher downs which included parents as well as students. These would occasionally be a part of a literary program.

A literary served both an educational and a social function in rural communities. Members of the community would get together at the schoolhouse approximately once each month to discuss a variety of political issues or to debate a topic.

These discussions ranged from serious debates of current events to more lighthearted questions such as: "Does a horse push or pull?" "Which is more destructive, fire or water?" "Which is more useful, a dishcloth or a broom?" and "Is it easier to live with an exceptionally clean woman or an exceptionally dirty one?"

The last topic leaves one wondering to what extent women chose to or were encouraged to participate in some of the discussions. This point is

---

[1]Interview with Caroline Sandoz Pifer of Gordon, Nebraska.

not clear even after questioning several people. However, it is known that the teacher was often responsible for organizing the literary.

In addition to the events already mentioned, a literary might have included recitations by school children, singing, or a play put on by members of the community.

Finally, many literaries included a newspaper. Mrs. Caroline Pifer described this activity:

> . . . Every time you had a continuing newspaper that took pointed jabs at everyone in the country and discussed their romances. Romance was the funniest thing and the chief object of everybody because they had all this new batch of teachers out here every year and somebody always wanted to marry them off some way or other. And there were always bachelors willing to be married to them . . . . The main fun was these teachers every winter and following their romances.[2]

Various dinners were held at schoolhouses. One neighborhood held Thanksgiving Dinner every year at the school. Another dinner was held at the end of the school year. Often this would be a picnic and would be attended by everyone in the community. One teacher recalled that she was expected to provide ice cream for the picnic--a responsibility that proved to be quite a financial burden on her meager salary.

The Christmas program was a special event in rural communities. Teachers and students spent many hours learning songs and pieces to be recited, and the mothers of the community were often recruited to make costumes. When the big event was presented, nearly everyone in the community attended. Teachers and former students alike tell of standing room only crowds where perhaps 70 or 80 people would pack a schoolhouse that measured no more than 20 feet by 30 feet. Before rural electric systems were installed, it wasn't unusual for members of the community

---

[2] Ibid.

to bring lanterns to the Christmas program and other evening events and, of course, if one didn't want to stand, it was also a good idea to bring a chair.

For some families, special events such as the Christmas program introduced them to customs or allowed a luxury not found at home. One of these customs was the Christmas tree. Many of the people interviewed by the Country School Legacy Project remembered stories about the school Christmas tree. Fifty years ago, a Christmas tree at home wasn't as common as it is today, and a few people interviewed recalled the school tree as being the first one they had seen. One man told of a teacher who wanted his class to have a tree but found himself located on an arid treeless plain in western Nebraska. This teacher constructed a Christmas tree of lath for the school.

As the social center of the community, the schoolhouse was also used for a number of other functions including 4-H meetings, extension club meetings, and in some areas for church services. A Box Butte County woman, Mrs. Lena Delsing, recalled growing up in a community that was predominantly Catholic. Since no priest was available in the community, a priest would come by wagon from the Indian reservation to conduct Mass in the school building.[3] Although Mrs. Delsing wasn't certain of the distance or the number of other schools that may also have been used for Mass, the trip probably wasn't made very often since Pine Ridge is approximately fifty miles across country from the community where she lived.

Other uses early western Nebraska schools were put to included a child's funeral and as a meeting place during World War I where the women of one community gathered to knit socks for the soldiers.

---

[3]Interview with Mrs. Lena Delsing, Hemingford, Nebraska.

Perhaps one of the most colorful uses for a country school building was remembered by Mrs. Mae Manion who told of a Sheridan County school which had its windows sodded in during the Wounded Knee uprising. Frightened members of the community gathered in the school to defend themselves in the event of an attack by Indians.[4]

Today, residents of rural communities are involved in many of the activities of nearby towns so they are much less isolated and less dependent upon one another for entertainment. As a result, most of the activities that are held in today's country school are school-related, however, those events the school does sponsor are still enthusiastically supported by community members.

---

[4]Interview with Mae Manion, Alliance, Nebraska.

THE CURRICULUM OF THE COUNTRY SCHOOL

When students of the early twentieth century western Nebraska country schools are asked what subjects they studied, the usual reply is "Why reading, writing, and arithmetic, of course!" Additional questioning will reveal the subject matter also included history, grammar, physiology or health, geography, and orthography--what we would call "spelling." Depending upon the skill and interest of the teacher, a school may also have offered some training in music or art. Singing was important and patriotic songs, hymns, and Stephen Foster selections were popular. Students recalled singing Prohibition songs during the 1920's. A few students remembered studying miniature reproductions of famous paintings. Friday afternoons appeared to be reserved almost universally for art projects.

If one accepts the historical definition of "curriculum" as subjects or subject matter, then it can be safely concluded that country schools offered a fairly limited curriculum, or what today would probably be referred to as "the basics." No bilingual, special education, or learning disability programs would have been found in an early country school, although in some schools where low enrollment, a skilled teacher, and a special need happened to come together, a rough equivalent might have existed. Accounts of a country teacher's efforts to help an individual pupil with special needs are not unusual, however, in general, the curriculum was much less broad than it is today.

Given the physical plant, resources, level of teacher preparation, and the expectations of pioneer communities, the basics were all that were required, and probably in many cases, presented quite a challenge.

The following description of a pioneer school gives some idea of just how challenging the task of teaching even a basic curriculum must have been:

> The first requirement was a place. Often this was a sod house abandoned by an early homesteader, or a room in a settler's home. At least two schools were housed in dugouts, one in a granary, and one spring term in a tent. In most communities, a settler donated land, neighbors raised a sod building in one or two days. Usually a floor of sawmill lumber was laid. When these boards dried out, pencils dropped through the cracks. Furnishings were homemade benches and desks, a box of chalk, a cast iron stove, a coal scuttle and shovel, a water pail and dipper, and a tin wash basin.
>
> In the first schools the pupils brought books from home that had been used in their former homes. It was not unusual to have a class in which each child had a textbook from a different author. The curriculum, though limited, contained the essential subjects. Reading, Penmanship, History, Music, and English stressed moral and patriotic values. . . . .
>
> Slates with red felt edges and a stubby slate pencil were used for "working problems." The slate pencils were wrapped in a paper flag and the child felt sad when the pencil wore down to the pretty paper and some of it had to be torn off, or if the pencil dropped to the floor and was broken. Cedar pencils, which smelled nice, had a small eraser glued in one end. They could be bought for one cent each. Every scrap of blank paper was saved to stretch out the thick, five cent tablet that had to last all term.[1]

One of the major handicaps to any early school must have been the limited number of books or other publications available. Occasionally, a student of an early day school will mention a magazine or major newspaper that was received by the school or a family, but this was the exception to what was usually available. Few schools in western Nebraska were as well equipped as the Fairview School in Scottsbluff County which had 92 books in its library in the 1913-14 term. The list of books recorded by the teacher on the inside back cover of "Welch's System of Classification, Gradation and Close Supervision" included the following titles: The Castaways, Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Tale of Bunny Cottontail, Gulliver's Travels, Self-Help, Through the Looking Glass, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Tennyson's Poems, Treasure Island, Lives of Our

---

[1]Mae Manion, Prairie Pioneers of Box Butte County (Alliance, Nebraska: Iron Man Industries, 1976), p. 28.

Presidents, Two Years Before the Mast, Vanity Fair, Pilgrim's Progress, Whittier's Poems, and The Union Library Encyclopedia (eight volumes). This list also included several biographies of famous Americans.

In addition to less than ideal facilities, early schools were normally in session for a much shorter period than the nine months that are now standard. Three to six month terms were the rule because early school districts could not afford to pay a teacher for a longer period. School terms were usually held when they would not conflict with the need for children to help on their home farms and ranches. Thus, the school usually began in October and ended sometime before the spring planting season.

Much of a student's work emphasized memorization and oral recitation of maxims, poems, and "pieces." Exercises in mental arithmetic were also common. Undoubtedly this preference for rote learning was made necessary by the limited number of books available and the fact that paper and pencils were too expensive to be used on a regular basis or as liberally as we use them today. The attitude that assignments requiring the memorization of lengthy pieces imposed a certain mental discipline seemed to be accepted by both teacher and students. The extent to which higher level skills of thinking such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation[2] were required or encouraged is less clear, however, it appears that recall or recognition skills were more commonly stressed.

Up until the time that state requirements raised the minimum qualifications for teachers and prescribed a course of study, the primary determinant of the curriculum was the teacher and his or her skills and preferences for subject matter. Such a system produced graduates who varied widely in

---

[2]Higher level thinking is defined here as those intellectual abilities and skills identified by Benjamin S. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

levels of skill attainment. One ninety-year-old man told of an outstanding mathematics teacher who came to his school when he was in the eighth grade. Under this teacher he learned to find both square and cube roots of numbers and can still remember the square root operation. However, the graduate of a rural school in a neighboring county told of such poor instruction in math that he never learned long division, decimals, or fractions in his eight years of school.

From these examples, it appears that Dr. Robert Manley's assessment of education in the pioneer school was very accurate:

> It is easy to romanticize these days of the pioneer schools. There are scores of wonderful stories about rattlesnakes in the rafters, about cold days when inkwells had to be buried in the ash pit of the stove to keep them from freezing, about the range cattle who nibbled away the walls of a school made from bales of hay, and about the confrontations between the schoolmarm and a twenty-year-old hired man who was in the third grade. There were able teachers and capable, eager students in some schools, but frontier education generally was not quality education. School was "held" irregularly. Teachers received low wages and having to "board around" with families in the district did little to raise teacher morale. Many schools had no equipment and few books. No attempt was made to "grade" the schools, and the learning process was haphazard at best.[3]

As state involvement in education grew, attempts were made to standardize certain aspects of the curriculum. A law passed in Nebraska in 1891 required school districts to purchase textbooks and provide them free of charge to students. A 1903 law stated:

> The district school boards shall have the general care of the schools and shall have the power to cause pupils to be taught in such branches and classified in such grades or departments as may seem best adapted to a course of study which the school boards of any county shall establish by the consent and advice of the county superintendent thereof.[4]

---

[3]Robert N. Manley, Images of Nebraska Education (Lincoln, Nebraska: Selection Research Incorporated, 1972), p. 28.

[4]Richard E. Dudley, "Nebraska Public School Education 1890-1910," Nebraska History (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society, Spring 1973), p. 84.

In 1907, the Free High School Law "provided for free public high school education to any youth whose parent or guardian lived in a district which maintained less than a four-year high school. The course of study for the first eight grades was to be prescribed or approved by the state superintendent of public instruction."[5]

In keeping with the Free High School Law, the first Course of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska was published in 1909. The first Course of Study recommended laboratory or source methods be used in English, history, civics, geography, and the sciences in both elementary and secondary grades. It emphasized using original sources to encourage children to seek the answers to questions as opposed to a curriculum that emphasized memorizing facts. Thus, a variety of materials to supplement regular textbooks were required.[6]

Although this proposed system sounds remarkably progressive, it is unlikely that it brought about any great change in the curriculum or teaching techniques used in the typical western Nebraska school. Well-trained teachers were in short supply so it is likely that few teachers had the necessary training to carry out such suggestions.

A second obstacle to implementing state recommendations was financing. Schools depended upon a limited variety of instructional materials which were often donated. Many individuals who were students at about the time the first Course of Study was published report their school day consisted of recitations and work on the blackboard in arithmetic, spelling, diagramming sentences, map drawing, and penmanship practice. Ciphering contests and

---

[5]Ibid., p. 85.

[6]Ibid., p. 86.

spell-downs were common and popular with the students. The suggestions of the State, which required resource materials in addition to texts, were financially impossible for early school districts.

Apparently, these first attempts to prescribe a curriculum were also somewhat unpopular due to a philosophical split between the more classical orientation of educators and the desire of parents for a practical education for their children. Public pressure led to the broadening of the Course of Study by 1910 to include such courses as agriculture, domestic sciences, and manual arts.[7]

An examination of later Courses of Study indicates the basic curriculum remained relatively unchanged for several years. Concern was expressed, however, for the teaching technique that relied heavily on oral recitations. The introduction to the 1929 Course of Study stated:

> The present elementary curriculum contains courses in agriculture, arithmetic, bookkeeping, civics, drawing, English composition, geography, grammar, history, music, physiology and hygiene, reading, spelling, and writing. In the attempt to carry out such a program, many schools are overburdened with a large number of recitations every day. This is one of the outstanding weaknesses of the one-teacher school. It gives the teacher little time for anything but the hearing of so-called recitations. The more worthwhile exercises of instruction, drill, and the stimulation of self-activity receive scant attention. Instruction should commence with a real observation of things, and not with a verbal description of them.[8]

To remedy the problems of one teacher trying to teach many children distributed among several grades, a system called the "alternation plan" was proposed. Under this plan, the first and second grades were grouped together as were grades three and four, grades five and six, and grades

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] Courses of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska, (Lincoln, Nebraska: State of Nebraska Department of Public Instruction, 1929), p. 6.

seven and eight. Using these four groups, the school day was then divided into fourths with the first session being devoted to arithmetic, the second to reading and history, the third to language and hygiene, and the fourth to geography and agriculture. Pupils in one group would do the work of one year in one class and omit the other year. The following year the work omitted was completed. All pupils were combined when drawing, writing, and music were taught.

Over the following years, courses taught apparently remained about the same as those listed in 1929. The 1936 Course of Study included a brief bibliography and outline for teaching science, but that was the only change in offerings. The addition of science, however, was viewed as an important change in the curriculum by former students. Those individuals who attended school before the introduction of science who were interviewed by this project generally spoke highly of their country school educational experiences, but some did express regret that science was not a part of their educational background.

In summary, it seems accurate to state that the curriculum of the early western Nebraska country school concentrated heavily on the "three R's;" spelling and penmanship were both considered very important. Students usually emerged with a strong set of what we consider traditional American values. Early Courses of Study stress "character education" and schools tried very hard to instill the value of such characteristics as honesty, self-control, cheerfulness, patriotism, industry and thrift, and good health habits in students. Particular emphasis seemed to be placed upon discouraging smoking or using alcohol since a large part of the health curriculum stressed this subject matter.

In addition to formal subject matter, a variety of other learning experiences occurred as a result of the expectation that children would take

some responsibility in the day-to-day operation and maintenance of the school. It was not unusual for children to assist the teacher with gathering fuel, building fires, and keeping the schoolhouse and grounds attractive. Most schools had no playground equipment, so the teacher and the children created their own recreation by playing a variety of games. These activities served to reinforce the value placed in class on teamwork and cooperation.

It is probably accurate to say that less was expected of the early country school than parents expect of schools today. Often children had more responsibilities at home and these responsibilities helped prepare them for their adult lives. Success in an occupation was even less closely correlated with success in school than it is today. Many occupations were learned during a period of apprenticeship and evidence of educational attainment was not required for entry or advancement. The rate of social change still moved at a pace that made it reasonable to expect to live one's adult life in a world not drastically different from one's youth. Given prevailing conditions, beliefs, and societal values, curriculum decisions were made in a very different context than today.

Dr. Manley summarized the values which to a great extent shaped educational decisions in the early days of rural Nebraska:

> . . . . The attitudes acquired by the people who doggedly stuck to the land had a decisive impact upon educational values and goals.
>
> First, there was the belief that education should be practical and emphasize the basic courses. Pioneers distrusted "experts" and they had little patience with those who advocated what were popularly considered expensive and unnecessary "frills" in education.
>
> . . . . The desire for limited government, the demand for local control, the dependence upon the property tax, and the belief that agrarian values are of the highest importance in our society--these were convictions Nebraskans shared and it was by these standards that they judged education.[9]

---

[9]Manley, pp. 29-31.

There is danger of overgeneralizing when discussing curriculum in the country schools. The lack of qualified teachers and the fact that many school districts did not have the financial resources to support a well-equipped school suggest wide differences were probably found among schools. Early attempts by the State to standardize the curriculum could do little to resolve these problems.

Recollections of students who attended these early day schools generally agree on subjects taught, but they remember little about actual content or specific classroom activities.

Both teachers and students tell of schools who varied in enrollments from only one pupil to as many as twenty-five. While many students tell stories of learning as they listened to older students, it is also easy to conclude that schools of one or two students did not offer this advantage. On the other hand, teachers who taught schools with unusually large enrollments tell of the impossible task of teaching all subjects to twenty or more students in all eight grades.

Former students appear generally satisfied with their country school experiences, but piecing all of these bits of information together tells less than one would like to know about what actually went on in a country school.

THE COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER: ROLES, RULES, AND RESTRICTIONS

The key factor in the quality of education delivered in the country school was the teacher. While this is still true today, the nature and scope of the teacher's job has changed considerably since the founding of early schools in western Nebraska.

Before school districts were organized, children were often taught by their parents or by a neighboring housewife. According to one account, "the housewife would arrange her schedule so that she would be cooking in the kitchen while the children studied--then the family would eat while the school children were playing in the yard."[1]

As the first districts were organized, teachers were drawn from a number of sources. Some were homesteaders with varied backgrounds. A Box Butte County woman wrote about her first teacher who was "a former cowboy in Wyoming" who taught school while "satisfying Uncle Sam's requirements for final proof on his land."[2] The same author told of another early teacher, G. W. Jones, who was a railroad conductor and homesteader known as "Poker" Jones. The writer went on to comment: "Can anyone wonder that the school excelled at 'ciphering down' following that good instruction?"[3]

In 1881, three grades of teaching certificates were provided for by the State of Nebraska. The third grade certificate was the lowest level of certification and required passing exams in reading, writing, geography, orthography, arithmetic, physiology, and English composition and grammar. A second grade certificate included these requirements plus knowledge of

---

[1]Leon A. Moomaw, Pioneering in the Shadow of Chimney Rock (Gering, Nebraska: Courier Press, 1966), p. 81.

[2]Anne N. Phillips and Vilma D. Ball, History of Box Butte County, 1939, p. 71.

[3]Ibid.

history of the United States, civil government, bookkeeping, blackboard drawing, and theory and art of teaching. The first grade certificate required all of the subjects for the lower level certificates as well as passing exams in algebra, geometry, botany, and natural philosophy.[4]

County superintendents were given the responsibility of administering teacher exams and granting certificates. The exams were usually given at an annual Teachers Institute held during the summer. Special sessions on teaching techniques were also part of these institutes.

Expectations for teachers were high as illustrated by the following statement from an early county superintendent:

> There are four elements that enter into the composition of a teacher--good moral character, scholarship, aptness to teach, and ability to govern. The person who lacks any one of these cannot become an ideal teacher.[5]

Schools usually did settle for less than the "ideal teacher" simply because teachers of any kind were relatively scarce. There were 6243 school districts in Nebraska in 1890 and only 9029 teachers. (2612 of these were men.)[6] The further west one went in Nebraska, the more difficult it became to find a certifiable teacher. The majority who did qualify did so only at the third grade level of certification, and in some cases, teachers were certified without passing all of the exams. The following comment by a superintendent illustrates the frustration created by a constant shortage of qualified teachers:

---

[4]Richard E. Dudley, "Nebraska Public School Education 1890-1910," Nebraska History (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1973), p. 72.

[5]"Record of Teachers Institutes," Superintendent's Record, Dawes County, Nebraska, 1893, p. 213.

[6]Dudley, p. 62.

> Owing to a scarcity of teachers I have been compelled to issue third grade certificates: every time under protest. A person who holds only a low certificate of any grade should make some systematic effort to improve his scholarship.[7]

It appears that many teachers in the late 1800's and early 1900's taught to supplement their incomes and viewed teaching as a means of establishing claims in western Nebraska. However, even those who viewed teaching as something more than a temporary occupation would have had a difficult time advancing their formal education since the nearest college or university was several hundred miles away.

The establishment of junior normal schools by the state in 1903 was designed to begin to alleviate the problem of teacher shortages. When the Chadron Normal School was founded in 1911, another major step was taken toward meeting this pioneer area's need for teachers.

Teacher shortages continued to be a problem well into the 1900's. Western Nebraska often imported teachers from the East and young women, intrigued by the romance of teaching out west, found positions through teaching agencies. In some cases, the young teacher's entire family would follow her out and settle in western Nebraska. Many of these women left the classroom and married local men; others found teaching in a remote country school to be too lonely and demanding and left.

Mrs. Goldie Bigsby, who grew up near Gering, Nebraska, in the early 1900's, recalled some of her early teachers:

> Most of our teachers at that time came from the East... it was hard to get a teacher. The wages were low...They were all unmarried except one lady who lived in the community...They were usually young women in their early twenties. One lady who came out from the East...seemed so sad. One day we caught her crying. She went home for Thanksgiving and never came back.[8]

---

[7]"Record of Teachers Institutes," Superintendent's Record, Dawes County, Nebraska, 1893.

[8]Interview with Goldie Ewing Bigsby, December 12, 1980, Scottsbluff County, Nebraska.

Another source of teachers was created as pioneer schools began graduating their students. At first, many young girls completed only the eighth grade and began teaching as soon as they could pass the teacher exam and acquire a certificate.

Mrs. Mae Manion went out to teach at age 16 after she had completed the tenth grade. She explained her decision to teach by saying:

> . . . that's all I wanted to do. There wasn't much else a girl could do unless she worked in the hotel or in somebody's home.[9]

Mrs. Manion went on to say that it was customary to only teach one year in a school when she started teaching.

Although many of these teachers were only a few years older than some of their students, they were expected to assume many responsibilities. In addition to conducting classes, teachers gathered fuel and built the fire, kept the schoolhouse clean, and shoveled snow.

Even the appearance of the school grounds was seen as a teacher's responsibility, at least by the state. A publication issued by the Department of Public Instruction headed one section with the question: "Is Your School House Attractive?"

Under that heading the publication suggested:

> This is a personal question to each teacher. Is the school house in which you are teaching attractive in appearance? Are the school grounds attractive? If not, what have you done to make them attractive? It will not do for us to sit around and wait for someone else to do it, for that policy will not improve the conditions. On the other hand, if you have done what you could each year to make the school house and the school grounds more attractive, you have left your mark on the school, in the minds and hearts of the pupils, and upon the homes which they will help to make later on.[10]

---

[9]Interview with Mae Manion, December 5, 1980, Alliance, Nebraska.

[10]"Suggestive Programs for Special Day Exercises," Lincoln, Nebraska, Department of Public Instruction, 1913, p. 6.

Suggestions for beautifying unsightly school grounds followed and offered the following advice:

> . . . Look the situation over carefully and formulate a definite plan. Do not attempt to do it all at one time. Get the school board to do at least one thing each year towards the improvement. Then decide upon some certain alteration which you and the pupils can carry out. The next year do a little more. For instance, suppose you get the school board to paint the school house this year. Next year ask them for a new walk or new outhouses. This year suppose you get the pupils to level the yard and sow grass seed, putting on some manure if necessary. Plant a tree on Arbor Day. Next year plant some shrubs, some vines to grow over your out-houses to shield them, and keep the lawn in condition. Another year keep all this in shape and do a little more. Three or four years of constant, definite work will transform a school house. Your pupils will be glad to help and will become proud of the school.[11]

It seems likely that these suggestions were probably seen as laughable at best by western Nebraska rural teachers. Most schools were very poor and the school was usually located on an arid prairie. Some schools in larger districts were even moved periodically to be close to families with children. Trees were planted by teachers and students for Arbor Day, but beyond that, work on school grounds was probably a discouraging task.

Given the nature of early teaching jobs and the variety of duties a teacher was expected to perform, some of the local graduates of country schools were perhaps better equipped to meet the challenges than teachers who came from the East. Although the academic preparation of these local teachers may have been weaker than that of their eastern counterparts, the experience of growing up in the country gave local women an understanding of the conditions under which they would teach.

Caroline Sandoz Pifer completed normal training in high school and taught in the Nebraska Sandhills in the early 1930's. Part of her training included visits to a few country school houses, but it didn't begin to

---

[11] Ibid.

prepare one for dealing with the day to day problems a rural teacher faced. Mrs. Pifer recalled some of the deficiencies in her teacher training program:

> I remember how stupid our teacher was, as soon as she got out of town . . . She didn't know about section lines and stuff like that or how to find a road, or a thing. She had always lived in Omaha . . . What we should have had was how to build a fire. Of course I knew that from home, but that's what the first thing the girls from the East had problems with. Sometimes schools would catch fire because they put too much fuel in.[12]

Mrs. Pifer went on to elaborate on what it took to be a successful country teacher:

> . . . . You had to know how to stand the country. Now the girls that played cards and things like that, they got along fine, but in those days there was no church out there. I was about eleven or twelve years old before I ever saw a Sunday school and a lot of them couldn't adjust to that kind of living . . . they just didn't know how to relate to the people. . . You had to have some idea of weather because if you didn't have sense enough to know when to send those kids home why you either decided that you were too late to send them and you held them there and took care of them, or then you sent them home soon enough so they could get home. . . It wasn't for the faint stomached either because eating in those days at these places was not fancy or anything like that. You didn't have lettuce and this and that and something else. Probably in the winter you'd have fresh meat, but the rest of the time you'd have salt pork.[13]

Many teachers mentioned the chore of building a fire, so it must have been one of the most unpleasant, or at least most memorable, tasks. Mrs. Manion described her own special technique:

> One thing about this heating the school house, it wasn't always warm when you got there, especially on Monday morning. The teacher had to come early because the teacher had to build the fire. . . I always kept a tomato can with some kerosene in it in a place where it wouldn't be very easily gotten into, and whenever I went home I'd pick up a sack full of cobs out of the hog lot. . . I'd bring them to school and I'd put a

---

[12]Interview with Carolyn Sandoz Pifer, Gordon, Nebraska, December 11, 1980, in Chadron, Nebraska.

[13]Ibid.

> couple of cobs in the can of kerosene and use the cobs to start a quick fire. Sometimes you couldn't get it warm enough and you'd have to sit around the stove.[14]

Expectations for teachers varied somewhat from one community to another. Generally teachers were not married. This may have been partially because many were very young, but some contracts actually stipulated that the teacher could not marry during her term of employment. A prevailing belief was that a married woman did not have time to run a home and teach.

While men teachers appeared to be fairly rare in western Nebraska during the twenties and thirties, there were many in Kansas according to Royce Vathauer who went to school in the 1930's. Mr. Vathauer went on to say, however, that married women were not hired because communities believed "one bread winner was enough."[15]

Nearly all schools did expect teachers to uphold certain standards. Mrs. Goldie Bigsby began her teaching career in Banner County in 1923 when she was seventeen. Her first job was in a school similar to the one she had attended, so as she put it, she "knew what it was all about: how you had to teach all eight grades and had to stay in the district." She went on to describe what else was expected:

> Well they of course wanted you to stay in the district and you usually had to because you were so far from town. . . They wanted you to be of good moral character. I suppose if a person had smoked a cigarette, that would have been the end of the contract right there.[16]

Although teachers rarely got to town where she taught, Mrs. Bigsby did say that there were activities such as pie socials, box suppers, and

---

[14]Interview with Mae Manion.

[15]Interview with Royce Vathauer, December 15, 1980, Chadron, Nebraska.

[16]Interview with Goldie Ewing Bigsby.

dances for recreation. In fact, the rural teacher played an important part in the social life in the community. Many of the people interviewed by the Country School Legacy Project stressed the importance of the teacher in community life.

There were limits to how much community activity the teacher was allowed to participate in. A Teacher's Contract from 1919 in Kimball County stated that Mrs. Mamie Patterson agreed "to observe the rules and regulations of the district board." Written below this line by hand was the following line: "and not attend dances when required to teach the following day." Other districts were much more strict and dancing by the teacher would have been frowned upon anytime.

Living with families was not always a comfortable arrangement. Mrs. Alice Richards described her first experience with "boarding out." She taught in Sherman County in central Nebraska, and lived in the sod house with a family she described as "desperately poor." The family had three children of school age as well as several younger ones. In Mrs. Richards' words, "you never had a minute to yourself, and when I went home on week-ends, the woman wore my clothes."[17]

Mrs. Pifer also remembered some of her experiences living with families in districts where she taught:

> "I slept one winter with two of us on a single bed. I don't know how we ever managed it because when one turned we both had to turn. Another winter (1933) I boarded and I got $45/month and I paid $15/month for my board and feed for the horse.[18]

She went on to say that she had her own horse, but the district would have provided one if needed. Under either arrangement, however, the teacher bought the feed.

---

[17]Interview with Alice Richards, December 4, 1980, Chadron, Nebraska.

[18]Interview with Myra Williams, December 10, 1980, Oshkosh, Nebraska.

Rural teachers didn't always have an easy day in the classroom either. While some schools had only a few students, several teachers told of struggling to teach over twenty-five students in all eight grades. Many teachers must have experienced some of the feelings Mrs. Myra Williams of Oshkosh described:

> I liked some parts of the teaching very much and then there were some things which were quite difficult to cope with. One thing, I never could get everything in. When you have all eight grades, as I did in some of the schools, there's an awful lot of classes, and ten minutes for each class to start and make your assignments and check on the work that the children are doing and answer their questions didn't go very far. It was quite a rat race. I just couldn't get it all done as I should have.[19]

Considering all of the difficulties associated with teaching in a country school, one wonders what motivated people to enter such an occupation. The job was demanding; living conditions were often undesirable; and the pay was probably not enough to offset these factors.

The records of District 18 in Dawes County indicated teachers were hired only for as many months as the district could afford. In 1896, the first year the school was open, the teacher was paid $33.33 per month for six months. The following year school was only held for four months, and the teacher earned $25 per month. Wages went up to $45 per month for five months in 1908, and raised again in 1910 to $50. By 1925, the teacher was earning $90 per month for seven months.

During the Depression wages fell. The teacher's salary was dropped back to $60 per month in 1932. Later on it raised until the teacher in 1939 earned $75. By this time, nine months of school were required by law.

It wasn't until 1946 that the district raised the teacher's salary back up to $90. The following year, wages were raised to $100 per month.

---

[19]Interview with Myra Williams, December 10, 1980, Oshkosh, Nebraska.

Because of the weak financial condition of rural school districts, many teachers were paid in warrants or drafts, which meant their actual take-home pay was less than the salary they were hired for. Mrs. Alice Richards described her experiences with this system.

> The first year that I taught in rural school. . . I taught for $40 a month, and this district was quite hard up, and your checks. . . they were not a check, it was an order or a draft. . . and since they didn't have money enough in the bank, when you took it to the bank you had to take a discount on it because they didn't have enough money in their treasury to pay it right then. . . I only paid $10 for board and room which left me $30 when I got all $30, but most of the time I didn't get quite all of it.[20]

Perhaps the major reward associated with teaching a country school was the respect that went with the job. In general, the teacher was considered a special person in the community. While it is true that boarding conditions were sometimes unacceptable by today's standards, often what was provided was the best the host family had to offer. Some early teachers did recall instances where parents did not support their efforts to control unruly children, however, it was far more common for the school board and parents to cooperate with the teacher.

The role of the teacher in the country school was so multifaceted and demanding that even today's country teacher, whose job usually includes responsibilities not expected of teachers in the neighboring towns, would probably hesitate at signing a typical contract. In addition to regular classroom activities, a country teacher may have been faced with hauling water, doing janitor work, killing snakes, and helping a student manage his horse.

Teaching was regarded as an important job, and the teacher who could fill that job was accorded a good deal of respect in the school district.

---

[20]Interview with Alice Richards.

COUNTRY SCHOOLS TODAY

Although the major focus of this project has been upon the history of the country school, the research phase of the project involved visits to many schools of historical interest that are still functioning today. The country school is very much a part of life in many western Nebraska counties, indeed in all of Nebraska.

According to Nebraska Department of Education statistics, Nebraska had 1,062 school districts in 1980, the second highest in the nation. Of those, 743 were small Class I schools. The typical Class I school (194 of them) had six to ten students. Ninety-seven Class I schools enrolled five or fewer students, and 151 had more than 30.[1]

In western Nebraska, the eleven counties that make up the Panhandle range in number of Class I districts from Sheridan County with 34 to Banner County which is all one school district.[2] Rural schools are found that enroll only one student, while others had several teachers and 60 to 80 students.

Rural schools in western Nebraska not only vary widely in enrollment, but also in buildings, facilities, and other resources. Distances from population centers range from only a couple of miles to over fifty. Some districts have lost population and may soon be closed, while others are experiencing unprecedented growth.

While the small white rectangular building on the prairie with one teacher and a few students still exists, it is not typical. In fact, it is impossible to identify a "typical" rural school in western Nebraska

---

[1]"State's School Districts Number 1062," The Lincoln Journal, February 10, 1981, p. 19.

[2]Nebraska Educational Directory 1980-81, 83rd Edition, Nebraska State Department of Education.

both because of the difficulty of defining "rural" and because of the variety of schools that fall under the Class I category. Thus, rather than attempt to discuss country schools today in general terms, this paper will describe a few individual schools in western Nebraska. These schools will not necessarily be representative, but rather are chosen to illustrate the wide variety of institutions that are categorized as country schools.

Perhaps the best way to show the contrasts among country schools in western Nebraska is to look at two counties which, although they are neighbors, are quite different in population density and terrain. As a result, their rural schools are also quite different from each other.

Sioux County is primarily covered by prairie grasslands and is the sixth largest county in the state of Nebraska. With a total population of 1,970 and only one town, the county seat of Harrison (population 377), the county has fewer than one person per square mile. To meet the needs of the many ranch children living in Sioux County, rural schools are maintained.

One of the most isolated schools in the county, District 23, is located in the northwestern portion of the county and enrolled one seventh grade student during the 1980-81 school year. A large modern mobile home was provided by local ranchers and parked next to the student's ranch home. The teacher commuted daily from South Dakota.

During 1980-81, this school was allowed to operate on a hardship basis by the State of Nebraska since the student would have to travel at least 45 miles to another school; however, it expects an increase in enrollment in the coming years. In 1981-82, three kindergarten students will start school, so the district will reopen its frame school house which is approximately four miles south of the South Dakota border. Over a dozen children under the age of five live in the district, so enrollment will continue to increase.

Another school, District 14 or Cottonwood, sits just over the northeastern border of the county. The small L-shaped building is surrounded by gently rolling hills scattered with pine trees, and like District 23, is isolated enough to make travel difficult for anything but a four-wheel drive vehicle during much of the winter. The nearest community is Crawford, Nebraska, located eighteen miles to the south and east in Dawes County.

During 1980-81, the Cottonwood school had seven students: two kindergarten students, one second grader, one third grader, and one student in each of the fifth, sixth, and eighth grades. The traditional Christmas program is still presented each year in this school and in most rural schools. These children also travel to a nearby school for a spelling bee. The new teacher, a young man from Wyoming named Bob Smith, had added a new dimension to the school curriculum by giving the children music lessons on the guitar and dulcimer.

Moving south in Sioux County, one encounters another small school, District 46. The school is housed in a bunkhouse which sits in the yard of a ranch located nine miles southwest of Harrison. The ranch owner has allowed the school to use the building for the past six years.

Another older one-room school building sits approximately four miles northwest of the ranch; however, the bunkhouse provides a more modern facility complete with a kitchen. One of the special advantages this school enjoys is a location which permits it to use educational television. Not all schools in this large county can pick up television signals.

The teacher of the school, Grace Wilward, was raised in this school district, had lived in California a few years, and returned with her husband to live in western Nebraska. Thus, she was well aware of the challenges of teaching in a small school. For example, although this school is relatively

close to a town, the winter storms in this area are often so severe that it is customary for students and teachers alike to always tell someone of the roads they will travel and when to expect them so they avoid being lost on one of the lonely gravel roads in a blizzard.

District 46 enrolled two students during 1980-81, and, as in the other rural schools mentioned, children received close individual attention. One special advantage the teacher noted of a school this size was the ease of making up days missed for snow or teacher illness. Because so few people are involved, another day can usually be scheduled, so it is seldom necessary for the school to employ substitute teachers.

One of the activities which would probably be considered special by a child attending an urban school is the luxury of home cooked meals during the school day. Children and the teacher occasionally take turns bringing the noon meal to school. When this writer and the county superintendent visited the school, our visit was unexpected; however, we were invited to join the school in enjoying homemade chicken and noodles, side dishes, and homemade pie. This custom of doing something a bit special for lunch was found in several of the country schools visited.

During this particular tour of country schools in Sioux County, the writer rode the bookmobile, which is a four-wheel drive pickup and camper equipped as a mobile library. The bookmobile visits each school once every three weeks to allow children to check out books and other materials. Because of the distance between schools and the gravel roads, it is not possible to visit more than four or five of the schools in the county on any given day. Five schools were visited on this tour, and approximately 140 miles were traveled, yet only one-third of the county was covered.

All schools in this county strive to continue to meet the state's regulations for operating a school set out in "Rule 14." This rule

requires schools to maintain certain physical facilities and prescribes that elementary schools provide instruction in reading and language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, health, physical education, art, and music. It also requires that school systems develop and adopt policies and procedures for special education for all resident handicapped children. A school is allowed two violations of the provisions of Rule 14 in one school year.

There are fifteen school districts in Sioux County, one of which contracts with Edgemont, South Dakota, and two others which send children to school in Scottsbluff County. The remaining districts operate their own schools. Some schools enroll a few more students than those mentioned, but generally speaking, all schools are small. Teachers mentioned doing a number of things to both enhance the learning environment and turn a few students into an advantage rather than a liability. A common activity encountered was a type of field trip which would be very difficult in anything but a very small school. One teacher in Sioux County had taken her two students to explore a pharmacy as a career education activity. (Teachers in other counties also use field trips to provide experiences for small groups. A young woman in Sheridan County mentioned taking her two students, a brother and a sister, several hundred miles to visit the state capitol.)

Given the isolation of much of Sioux County and the difficulty of travel during the winter, small schools appear to be a necessity. The options to maintaining those schools would usually involve either long drives daily by ranch families or the separation of families during the school year.

The people of Sioux County are determined to keep their rural schools and have organized groups to lobby before the Nebraska legislature whenever

legislation to do away with small schools is introduced. Parents of children mention liking the individual attention their children receive, and they like the idea of local control of schools. One person expressed the opinion that rural school children learn to be independent and learn how to study even in the busy atmosphere of a multigraded classroom. She also felt that the multigrade atmosphere helped prepare young students for advanced work and provided review for older students while encouraging comradeship between children of various ages.

Schools in Sioux County still play a central role in rural neighborhoods and receive considerable volunteer help and support from local residents. Although staunchly behind its rural schools, Sioux County does face many of the same problems that other rural areas face. The biggest problem according to Anne Quintard, County Superintendent, is coping with the 7% lid in Nebraska. Small districts rely almost entirely upon funds that fall under the spending lid and have few other sources of funding. She expressed the concern that future cuts in revenue sharing might affect their bookmobile, and their plans to add a traveling music teacher might be abandoned due to tight budgets. As one solution, schools are currently planning to combine on certain days to draw on the strengths of the various teachers.

Mrs. Quintard also attacked a common stereotype of the "country kid as the country bumpkin" by saying that rural families are more mobile than in the past and travel to nearby communities and out-of-state frequently. She feels television also has a major impact upon children's outlooks and that the quality of teachers available to rural schools has improved greatly over the years. Teacher shortages in rural areas are still a problem, however. She went on to say that the interest in reorganization in Nebraska

seems to be based primarily on the need to broaden the tax base rather than for educational reasons. For Sioux County, the cost of busing or gasoline for private vehicles, bad roads, the desire of parents to keep children at home, and the probable low attendance and stress on families in the event of further consolidation are major arguments against reorganization.

Just south of Sioux County lies Scottsbluff County. Although less than half the size of Sioux County, the population of Scottsbluff County was over 37,000 in 1978. Much of the farming in Scottsbluff County is under irrigation, so average farm acreage is much smaller than the ranches in Sioux County. Thus, rural schools in Scottsbluff County are much larger and less isolated than those in Sioux County.

The Haig School is located six miles west of Scottsbluff on Highway 29. It is a consolidated school that enrolled 61 K-8 students in 1980-81. Six teachers and a part-time music teacher staff the school which is housed in a large building with six classrooms, a stage, and a cafeteria and kitchen. The school participates in a county-wide athletic program that includes girls' volleyball, boys' basketball, and track.

The school is still the site of community meetings, an annual chili supper fundraiser, and a penny carnival sponsored by the Mothers' Club. Proceeds from the penny carnival go to support a college scholarship for a Haig graduate.

Charles Durnin, head teacher at Haig, stated their students do well when they enter high school. He says, "Even kids with low grades still do better in town--maybe we grade harder. When kids go to town, social adjustment may cause them to put their best foot forward. Maybe they're less inclined to let things slide simply because they're in a new situation."[3]

---

[3]Interview with Charles Durnin, Scottbluff County, December 12, 1980.

Mr. Durnin is also concerned about consolidation and believes in the advantages of his type of school. One of the major threats he sees to rural schools is the cost of meeting various state and federal regulations with local funds or only partial reimbursement from outside funds.

Charlie Barr, head teacher at the Lake Alice School, which is northeast of Scottsbluff, echoed Durnin's concerns about rural school finances. Lake Alice enrolled 80 K-8 students in 1980-81.

Mr. Barr feels "rural school kids are a little better in the basics, although rural schools cannot provide as broad a curriculum in junior high."[4]

Both Mr. Barr and Mr. Durnin expressed the opinion that a rural school is a more desirable teaching situation than large schools they've been in.

A third school in Scottsbluff County, Fairview, located northeast of Mitchell is a smaller school than either Haig or Lake Alice. Fairview is a two-teacher school and enjoys an abundance of community support and appreciation of its history. Recently a reunion was held that was attended by many former students of the school.

Mrs. Lynn Scott, a teacher at Fairview has experience both as a teacher and school board member in nearby city schools. She has become a strong advocate of rural schools as a result of her teaching experiences. She stated she feels she has more time in a rural school to help students, and students are under less pressure, particularly in junior high, to conform to peer pressure. She also noted a rural school has fewer problems with discipline.

Mrs. Scott stated, "Schools pull communities together. You see an interest and an involvement you don't see in the urban schools."[5]

---

[4]Interview with Charlie Barr, Scottsbluff County, December 12, 1980.

[5]Interview with Lynn Scott, Scottsbluff County, December 13, 1980.

Finances were also at the top of her list of concerns. She related a story of a rural school that was closed during the time she sat on the Mitchell school board:

> "The administration agreed with the board that the best education was going on out there. The children were getting a better education in their school out there than we could give them if we brought them in here; but because of fuel costs, because of maintaining the building at a standard that would meet all the requirements, and to provide the children with all the things state law says they must have as far as hot lunch and this kind of thing, the cost was prohibitive. There was no way we could keep the plant open. So even when boards know what's best for the children, sometimes the dollar still does the talking, and it depends how strong the community feels about supporting the school, paying the dollars that have to be spent."[6]

In summary, it is difficult to make any sweeping statements about country schools today. They vary in building size, enrollment, type of community, and financial resources.

The country teacher is better educated than his or her predecessors and somewhat better paid; however, they still often perform duties that range from janitor work to snake killing.

Country schools still serve as community centers, but that function is less important than it was in the days of poorer transportation.

Rural school consolidation and finance, as well as the quality of rural education, will continue to be controversial topics in western Nebraska for years to come.

---

[6] Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Commanger, Henry Steele. "Our Schools Have Kept Us Free," Life, October 16, 1950.

Courses of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska, Nebraska Department of Public Instruction, 1919.

Course of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska, Nebraska Department of Public Instruction, 1932.

Course of Study for Elementary School, Nebraska Department of Public Instruction, 1936.

Discussion Guide for State and Regional Meetings, Governor's 1963-64 Conference on Education.

Dudley, Richard E. "Nebraska Public School Education 1890-1910," Nebraska History, Spring 1973.

Early Days of Alliance and Box Butte County, collected by the Point of Rock Chapter, DAR, Alliance, Nebraska.

Elam, Stanley M. "The Lingering Lure of the Little Red Schoolhouse," Phi Delta Kappan, December, 1978.

Manion, Mae. Prairie Pioneers of Box Butte County. Alliance, Nebraska: Iron Man Industries, 1976.

Manley, Robert N. Images of Nebraska Education. Lincoln, Nebraska: Selection Research, Inc., 1972.

Mannheim, Karl. Ideology and Utopia, An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1968.

Mayer, Martin. The Schools. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961.

Moomaw, Leon A. Pioneering in the Shadow of Chimney Rock. Gering, Nebraska: Courier Press, 1966.

Nachtigal, Paul. Improving Rural Schools. The National Institute of Education, September, 1980.

Nebraska Statistical Handbook 1980-81. Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska Department of Economic Development, 1980.

Peshkin, Alan. Growing Up American: Schooling and the Survival of Community. University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Phillips, Anne N. and Vilma D. Ball. History of Box Butte County, Nebraska, 1939.

Potluck Papers: Cherry County Heritage Book. Cherry County Extension Council, 1974.

"Public School Statistics," Nebraska Blue Book, 1978-79.

Recollections of Sheridan County Nebraska, Sheridan County Historical Society, 1976.

"Record of Teachers Institutes," Superintendent's Record, Dawes County, Nebraska, 1893.

Rhoads, Minnie Alice. A Stream Called Deadhorse. Chadron, Nebraska: The Chadron Printing Company, 1957.

Roosa, Alma Carlson. "Homesteading in the 1880's: The Anderson-Carlson Families of Cherry County," Nebraska History, Fall, 1977.

"Rule 14, Revised, Regulations and Procedures for Approving the Continued Legal Operation of all Schools and the Opening of New Schools," Nebraska State Department of Education, Revised May 7, 1976.

Schroeder, William R. Great Plains School District Organization Project, Project Report for Nebraska, June, 1968

Sher, Jonathan. "A Proposal to End Federal Neglect of Rural Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, December, 1978.

"Small Schoolhouses that Won't Fade Away," U.S. News and World Report, September 10, 1979.

"State's School Districts Number 1062," The Lincoln Journal, February 10, 1981.

"Suggestive Programs for Special Day Exercises," Department of Public Instruction, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1913.

"The One Room Schools," Newsweek, February 5, 1979.

Van Ackern, Ruth. Sioux County Memoirs of its Pioneers. Harrison, Nebraska: Harrison Ladies Community Club, 1967.

Wood, A. B. Pioneer Tales of the North Platte Valley and Nebraska Panhandle. Gering, Nebraska: Courier Press, 1938.

The following people were interviewed on tape for the Country School Legacy Project:

Goldie Ewing Wilson Bigsby, Gering, Nebraska
Mary L. Carrick, Chadron, Nebraska
Lena Delsing, Hemingford, Nebraska
Don Deselms, Chadron, Nebraska
Harriet Foos, Mitchell, Nebraska
Theodore L. Goff, Jr., Chadron, Nebraska
Helen T. Grubb, Kimball, Nebraska
Rena Hall, Bridgeport, Nebraska
Dale Henderson, Scottsbluff, Nebraska.
Lee Henderson, Scottsbluff, Nebraska
Ronald G. Hupp, Chadron, Nebraska
Thelma Jones, Alliance, Nebraska
Alyce and Jack Lindeken, Chadron, Nebraska
Mae Peters Manion, Alliance, Nebraska
Berdine Maginnis, Chadron, Nebraska
Amanda M. Martens, Chappell, Nebraska
Edwin C. Nelson, Chadron, Nebraska
John T. Oldenburg, Gordon, Nebraska
Celia Sandoz Ostrander, Rushville, Nebraska
Bertha Palmer, Chadron, Nebraska
Wilma L. Parkin, Hemingford, Nebraska
Jeanette Peterson, Chadron, Nebraska
Luella Peterson, Kimball, Nebraska
Caroline Sandoz Pifer, Gordon, Nebraska
Anne Quintard, Harrison, Nebraska
Alice Richards, Chadron, Nebraska
Lynn Scott, Mitchell, Nebraska
Royce Vathauer, Chadron, Nebraska
Myra Williams, Oshkosh, Nebraska

In addition to this list, many other people not named here also provided information.